

On the characteristics of the keys

	Charpentier	Mattheson <i>Das neu-eröffnete Orchester</i> 1713	Rameau <i>Traité de l'harmonie</i> 1722	Schubart <i>Characteristics of the musical keys</i> 1787
C major	<i>gay et guerrier</i> gay and martial	Rude and impudent character: suited to rejoicing.	songs of mirth and rejoicing	Quite pure; innocence, simplicity, naïveté, and baby talk.
C minor	<i>obscur et triste</i> obscure and sad	Extremely lovely, but sad.	tenderness and plaints	Declaration of love and at the same time lamentation of unrequited love. Every languishing, longing, and sighing of the love-crazed soul lies in this key.
C# minor				Laments or repentance, intimate conversations with God, the friend, and a playmate of life; sighs of unsatisfied friendship and love lie in its circle.
Db major				A leering key, degenerating into grief and rapture. It cannot laugh, but it can smile; it cannot howl, but at least it can grimace through its weeping. Consequently, one can transfer only unusual characters and feelings to this key.
D major	<i>joyeux et très guerrier</i> joyous and very martial	Somewhat shrill and stubborn, suited to noisy, joyful, warlike, and rousing things	songs of mirth and rejoicing	The key of triumph, of Hallelujahs, of battle cries, of triumphant rejoicing.
D minor	<i>grave et dévot</i> grave and pious	Somewhat devout, calm; also somewhat grand, pleasant, and expressive of contentment.		Dejected womanhood that broods on emotions and illusions.
Eb major	<i>cruel et dur</i> cruel and harsh	Pathetic; concerned with serious and plaintive things; bitterly hostile to all lasciviousness.		The key of love, of devotion, of intimate conversation with God; expressing, through its three flats, the Holy Trinity.

On the characteristics of the keys

	Charpentier	Mattheson	Rameau	Schubart
Eb minor				Feelings of anxiety, of all the soul's deepest distress, of being lost in daydreaming, despair of blackest melancholy, of the souls' gloomiest condition. Every fear, every hesitation of the shuddering heart, breathes from the shocking E-flat minor. If ghosts could speak, they would doubtless speak in this key.
E major	<i>querelleux et criard</i> quarrelsome and grating	Expresses a desperate or wholly fatal sadness incomparably well; most suited for the extremes of helpless and hopeless love.	tender and gay songs; grandeur and magnificence	Loud shouts for joy, laughing pleasure, and still not altogether full gratification.
E minor	<i>effeminé, amoureux et plaintif</i> effeminate, amorous and plaintive	Hardly joyful because it is normally very pensive, profound, grieved, and sad, [but] still hope for consolation.	sweetness and tenderness	Naïve, womanly, innocent declaration of love, lament without murmuring, sighs accompanied by few tears. This key speaks of impending hope of the purest happiness calling forth in C major. One could compare it with a girl dressed in white, with a rose-red bow on her bosom. One withdraws from this tone with inexpressible grace again to the fundamental C major, where heart and ear find the most perfect satisfaction.
F major	<i>furieux et emporté</i> furious and hot-headed	Capable of expressing the most beautiful sentiments in the world in a natural way and with incomparable facility, politeness, and cleverness	tempests, furies, and the like	Complaisance and repose.
F minor	<i>obscur et plaintif</i> obscure and plaintive	Mild and calm, deep and heavy with despair, exceedingly moving; sometimes causes the listener to shudder with horror.	tenderness and plaints	Deep depression, wailing for the dead, groans of misery, and yearning for the grave.

On the characteristics of the keys

	Charpentier	Mattheson	Rameau	Schubart
F# minor				A gloomy key. It pulls at passion as the biting dog at one's pants leg. Anger and discontent are its language. Ordinarily, it does not seem to be well situated in its position: therefore, it always languishes for the repose of A major or for the conquering bliss of D major.
Gb major				Triumph in difficulty, a free sigh of relief on having crossed hills, reminiscence of a soul which has struggled hard and finally is victorious.
G major	<i>doucement joyeux</i> quietly joyful	Possesses much that is insinuating and persuasive; quite brilliant, suited to serious and to cheerful things.	tender and gay songs	Everything rustic, moderately idyllic and lyrical, each quiet and satisfied passion, every tender recompense for sincere friendship and true love: in a word, every gentle and serene motion of the heart can be expressed splendidly in this key.
G Minor	<i>sérieux et magnifique</i> serious and magnificent	Almost the most beautiful key; combines a serious quality with spirited loveliness, also brings an uncommon grace and kindness.	sweetness and tenderness	Displeasure, uneasiness, worry about a failed scheme; discontent gnashing at the bit; in a word, anger and disgust.
G# minor				Ill-humour, a heart squeezed to the point of suffocation, laments of misery which sigh at the double-sharp, difficult struggle — in a word, everything that rings through painful labour is this key's colour.
Ab major				The grave key. Death, decay, judgment, eternity lie in its orbit
A major	<i>joyeux et champêtre</i> joyous and rustic	Very gripping, although at the same time brilliant; more suited to lamenting and sad passions than to divertissements; especially good for violin music.	songs of mirth and rejoicing; grandeur and magnificence	This key contains declarations of innocent love, contentment over its situation, hope of reunion at the parting of a lover, youthful cheerfulness, and trust in God.

On the characteristics of the keys

A minor	<i>tendre et plaintif</i> tender and plaintive	Somewhat plaintive, melancholy, honourable, and calm.		Pious womanhood and tenderness of character.
Bb major	<i>magnifique et joyeux</i> magnificent and joyous	Very diverting and sumptuous, also somewhat modest, can pass as both magnificent and dainty.	tempests, furies, and like subjects	Cheerful love, good conscience, hope, and a longing for a better world.
Bb minor	<i>obscur et terrible</i> obscure and terrible		mournful songs	An oddity, for the most part dressed in the garment of night. It is somewhat disgruntled and embraces most rarely a pleasant mien. Mockery against God and the world; displeasure with itself and with everything, preparation for suicide resound in this key.
B major	<i>dur et plaintif</i> harsh and plaintive	Occurs only sometimes; seems to have an offensive, hard, unpleasant, and also somewhat desperate character.		Strongly coloured, announcing wild passions, made up of the crudest colours. Anger, rage, jealousy, fury, desperation, and every burden of the heart lie in its sphere.
B minor	<i>solitaire et mélancolique</i> solitary and melancholy	It can touch the heart.		The key of patience, of the silent expectation of fate, and of the submissions to the divine decree. Therefore, its complaint is so gentle, without ever breaking out in offending murmurs or whimpers. The application of this key is rather difficult for all instruments; for that reason, one finds very few pieces which are composed expressly in this key.

Mattheson translation from Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries*, UMI Studies in Musicology no. 67 (UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, 1983). Revised edition available from University of Rochester Press, 2002.

Schobart translation by Ted Dubois, from *New England Review* Vol. 25 no. 1/2, 2004).
Christina Friedrich Daniel Schubart (1739-1791) was a poet, preacher, and musician.